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Panel Votes To Delay New Sub

Assurances Sought On Superiority Over Soviet Vessels

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A House Armed Services subcommittee has voted to deny money for a new \$1 billion attack submarine unless the Pentagon can make the case that it would be significantly superior to dramatically improved Soviet boats, Navy and congressional sources said yesterday.

Navy leaders spent all weekend trying to reverse the House research subcommittee's vote calling for a radically different approach to building the next generation of U.S. attack submarines.

The panel, which made its decision in a closed session Thursday, is demanding that the Navy try to improve the existing SSN688 class submarines to preserve the U.S. edge in undersea warfare while striving to design a boat that would be much better than the new sub, the SSN21 Seawolf.

Adm. Kinnaird R. McKee, director of naval nuclear propulsion, and Vice Adm. Bruce DeMars, head of submarine warfare, went before a closed session of the House Armed Services seapower subcommittee yesterday to ask that the panel, which is considered more friendly to the Navy's point of view, save the new submarine.

President Reagan's two-year defense budget requests \$470.8 million for the Seawolf for fiscal 1988 and \$1.676 billion in fiscal 1989. The first submarine is projected to cost \$1.7 billion and later ones \$1 billion or less.

Congressional sources said the research subcommittee took the unusual step of putting a hold on one of the Navy's highest priorities

because of the Soviet attack submarine Akula. According to some sources, it is better in many respects than the U.S. 688 class. The Akula's successors, some specialists warned the subcommittee, may be quieter, faster and dive deeper than the Seawolf, slated to go into service in 1995.

Rather than going full speed ahead with Seawolf, the subcommittee majority argued, the Navy should be forced to conduct a fresh study to determine how the 688 class could be improved.

Two submarine builders, Electric Boat Division of General Dynamics Corp. and Tenneco's Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., would do the \$50 million study. Another \$100 million would be earmarked for a high-tech submarine, with a new generation of nuclear power and perhaps a hull made of a composite material designed for greater speed and diving capability.

Only if Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger certified to Congress that the 688 could not be made significantly better than it is today would the research subcommittee release the funds for Seawolf. Weinberger also would have to submit a statement that the Seawolf would be better than any attack boat the Soviets would have by 1995. Also, the Central Intelligence Agency director would have to submit a separate report to Congress listing what the Akula can and cannot do.

"We're not going to let the Navy make this evaluation," said one backer of the CIA proviso. "Our information is that the Akula has some features we can't duplicate, so the Pentagon can't keep saying the Soviets stole the technology from us."

The Pentagon says the Akula was launched in 1984, displaces 8,000 tons compared with 6,500 tons for the 688 Los Angeles class and, according to the latest edition of "Soviet Military Power," is "still on sea trials." Other sources said several Akulas are in operation and that they are dramatically quieter than previous Soviet subs.

A Navy fact sheet that McKee and DeMars took to Capitol Hill, obtained by The Washington Post, said that the subcommittee action would sink the Seawolf and waste

the \$1.4 billion already invested. It added that later versions of the 688 class submarines have been markedly improved as a result of another \$1.6 billion investment with "no further improvements possible" because of space and weight limitations.

Today's 688 class submarines have "proven better than Akula," according to the fact sheet. Navy officials said yesterday that improved versions of the 688, 17 of which are under construction and five more planned, will be even better.

Despite all the assurances, Navy leaders acknowledge that the Soviet Union in the last few years has almost closed the submarine gap. The Navy is asking for fresh billions for new attack subs at the same time it is requesting down payments on two more nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, projected to cost a total of \$7 billion.

Rep. Herbert H. Bateman (R-Va.) of the House seapower subcommittee said last night that one way to resolve the dispute is to go ahead with the Seawolf and set aside additional money for a more advanced, high-tech submarine. The full Armed Services Committee is scheduled to address the issue this week in marking up the defense authorization bill.

"The SSN21 should not become a victim of our concerns about Soviet advances," Bateman said.